Climate Museum Sends Distress Signals to Stimulate Discussion

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Highlight: Promoting the climate change conversation in a bold way throughout the five boroughs.

Body

New signs that resemble the digital highway messages that typically flash bad news about road construction, traffic delays, flood warnings and missing children will be dotting New York City by Labor Day.

But while they may warn of impending dangers, they are not typical. The 10 large solar-powered signs installed in the five boroughs through October are part of "Climate Signals," an exhibition by the Climate Museum. They will display what the museum's director, Miranda Massie, describes as "aphoristic text" — surprising poetry, metaphor, even humor — designed to tempt passers-by into discussing climate change and the role cities play in the problem and solutions.

"It's becoming axiomatic and clear that we need cultural transformation on climate in order to move forward," she said. This project is a start, she added. It's the second for the museum, which Ms. Massie founded three years ago.

Some signs will be in neighborhoods most vulnerable to climate change — where Hurricanes Sandy and Irene had the most impact, for example — and messages will appear in several languages. One of several partners on the project is the Mayor's Office for Climate Policy and Programs.

Peter S. Knight, chairman of the board, said the museum sought to involve people beyond scientists in this discussion, "to integrate artists, poets, musicians, because their work can relate the urgency in a deeper way."

"Conversation volunteers" from neighborhood organizations will staff each site on weekends, and Oct. 6 will be "Ask a Scientist Day." That's when the Climate Museum, in conjunction with the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies and two specialized research centers within Columbia University's Earth Institute, will station climate scientists at each sign to engage the public. There's also a "Climate Walk and Arts Workshop" on the beach with the Jamaica Bay-Rockaway Parks Conservancy on Sept. 30, among many other events.

The artist Justin Brice Guariglia created the signs and included one among his works in Storm King Art Center's group climate exhibition (through Nov. 11), one of many projects that have recently tackled the topic.

Ms. Massie and Mr. Knight are hoping to find a permanent home for the museum, which is temporarily on Governors Island, the site of some of the "Climate Signals" programs coming up. "A dedicated place where people can come just on this issue is urgently needed," Mr. Knight said. "And New York is, I think, the perfect place to do it."

Ms. Massie concurred, giving the example of the work that Holocaust and tolerance museums and memorials around the world have done to fight xenophobia, discrimination and genocide: "The idea of a mission-driven museum that is working to make a better future, that is the tradition that we are stepping into."

PHOTO: One of the signs that are popping up in New York City as part of an exhibition by the Climate Museum. Events are also planned to encourage dialogue about climate change. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Justin Brice Guariglia, via the Climate Museum FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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